



WHAT'S NEW IN GALATIANS?

Theme Resource Pack
September 2024
(1 September - 5 October)

Introduction

What's new in the book of Galatians? This ancient text (likely the first of Paul's letters and perhaps the oldest part of the New Testament) is strange, often beautiful, sometimes spiky and always full of unbridled passion. In it we discover that Paul cares deeply about the Galatians — despite how much they frustrate and perplex him. The church in Galatia is caught in the push and pull of a dangerous world in flux, trying to find their way in uncertain times and Paul is desperate for them to know that the only place to turn, the only thing strong enough and deep enough to rely on is Jesus Christ.

So what's new in Galatians? Or, perhaps, what's *ever-new* in Galatians? What is the Holy Spirit going to reveal to us about our lives and our culture today through the drive, tenacity and conviction of Paul?

Weekly Overview

- What's new about Paul? — *Who are we reading about?*
- What's new about faith and works? — *What are we learning about following God?*
- What's ever-new in the power of the Spirit? — *What does it mean to be a child of God?*
- What's new about freedom? — *What is true freedom?*
- What's new about our lives? — *What is freedom like shared together?*

Format

Every month we have a God-given theme delving into different aspects and areas of faith. Over the course of 2024 these themes connect and take us on a faith journey out into the wonders of life with Jesus. Our themes shape our Daily Worship, Sunday Live streams and all sorts of other creative things we get up to! Each week runs Sunday - Saturday and each has a series of daily Bible readings and prompts for reflection.

What's new about Paul? (Week 1, 1 September)

Introduction: This is likely the oldest of Paul's letters and therefore one of the first parts of the New Testament to be written down. This is a raw, passionate Paul, going straight for the jugular! He is deeply concerned about the churches in Galatia and wants to immediately grab his listeners' attention. We often forget that for the majority of the Bible's history the majority of people have listened to it and not read it. This is especially true for the original audience, such as the Galatians here. This letter with all its bombast would have been read aloud to an assembled group. Have we got too comfortable with simply reading the Bible and not hearing the words enacted, spraining to life? What's new in Galatians, in Paul, when we take time to hear the words, in translation, but still leaping from the page?

Setting the scene: A person reading Paul's letter aloud to a gathered group.

Seeds to sow: Read the first chapter of Galatians in your head and then read it again out loud. What do you notice after each reading?

- 1. Galatians 1: 1-5 It all starts with Christ.** Paul begins his letter, just as he finishes it: with a laser focus on Jesus Christ and on grace. 'Who sent me? Jesus that's who, *the* Jesus.' The folks in Galatia are being pushed and pulled in all sorts of directions and Paul wants them to begin by looking, not round about, but *up* to Christ Jesus.
- 2. Galatians 1: 6-10 Thaumazō!** What, no thanksgiving? In all Paul's other letters he moves from greetings to giving thanks, but not here, he perhaps shocks his audience by launching straight into a rebuke! The bombastic sounding *Thaumazō* is Greek for 'I am astonished!' We're only 25 seconds in and it's time to hold on to your hats!
- 3. Galatians 1: 11-24 Not of human origin!** So let's take stock as this month we're asking: what's new here? Paul is keen to stress his independence and claims only Jesus as his authority. What's striking here is what Paul is *not* doing. He is not playing a local power game, claiming the backing of powerful figures. The ancient world, much like our contemporary world, often rotated on trust and reputation, status and credentials. Whose faction are you in? Who's backing you? Follow the money. But here at the outset of this letter Paul chooses to go it alone. What's ever-new about this?
- 4. Galatians 2: 1-5 Paul accepted.** Having stressed his independence in the previous chapter Paul explains that while he was accepted by the apostles, that he was indeed vulnerable enough with them to check he was on the right path, he did so as his own man, unafraid to challenge their hypocrisy.
- 5. Galatians 2: 6-10 God doesn't play favourites!** At the heart of Paul's letter is the desire that the Galatians leap straight into relationship with Christ and not set up other mediators or unnecessary practices to get in the way of that life changing relationship. Paul is saying here: it's all about Jesus. Why are you arguing about taking the escalator or the lift when Jesus is simply saying, come on up!
- 6. Galatians 2: 11-13 Even Barnabas!** Paul's warning about peer pressure, politics and hypocrisy has a timeless ring.
- 7. Galatians 2: 14 How come!?** Paul confronts the cognitive dissonance of one of the heroes of the early faith — to his face. Better keep hanging on to those hats Galatians... What's new here?

What's new about faith and works? (Week 2, 8 September)

Introduction: Central to the book of Galatians is behaviour — what we do and why we do it. In the early church there was a lot of soul searching about what would hold these new communities together, these diverse, multi-lingual, multi-cultural groups that transformed traditional power structures. Was doing things as they've 'Aye been', behaving in very particular ways, not only *important* but *essential*? So as to hold these communities together and to please God? Does the right behaviour lead to the right relationship with God? Or does the right relationship lead to the right behaviour? What is new and fresh that we as churches need to hear today?

Setting the scene: Picture the scribe taking dictation from Paul as he's in full flow.

Seeds to sow: What is your impression of the relationship between Paul and the churches in Galatia? It's fair to say it's complex!

- 1. Galatians 2: 15-21 Living by faith!** Paul is deeply concerned that anything should get in the way between the Galatians and Jesus. He speaks movingly of how Christ lives in him, how he walks the walk as well as talks the talk. Faith is not an abstract thing, a mental checkbox, it is lived and embodied day by day.
- 2. Galatians 3: 1-6 You foolish Galatians!** Paul's not holding back. The Bible is full of strong emotion as humanity learns how to be humanity — beloved children of God. Paul is so annoyed not just because the Galatians don't get it, but rather because they got it and now have lost it! As we'll see in Galatians 5, Paul's going to get even angrier.
- 3. Galatians 3: 7-9 Remember Abraham!** Paul appeals to Abraham and how it was his faith in God that mattered, before the law was even a thing. For those saying, "Let's go back to Moses" Paul says, "Let's go even further back..." As you read what strikes you, what words leap out, what is new in the text?
- 4. Galatians 3: 10-14 Cursed?!** Paul is blazing. Significantly here Paul is talking about the status of those who *rely* on the law, the traditional codes of living that the Jewish community lived by. He is not saying that the law is in itself bad and he goes on to say that it has been part of guiding the people but Paul wants them to know that we can only *rely* on Christ. When we rely on other things, even good things, we are on a hiding to nothing. Nobody's perfect, nobody can be perfect enough at something like observing the law that they can bank on it.
- 5. Galatians 3: 15-22 Receiving the promise!** The promise of God, as made to Abraham pre-dates the law. The law codes has helped people to live, but it has not saved them, only God saves. It's not our good behaviour that gets us to God, it's God that transforms our behaviour!
- 6. Galatians 3: 23-26 How we belong.** Paul recognises that the law was part of belonging but he also stresses that something new is happening, a new kind of belonging together through Christ — on a whole new scale — all God's children through faith.
- 7. Galatians 3: 27-29 Cosmic unity!** Faith in Jesus as a means of international, universal unity — all one!

What's new about the power of the Spirit? (Week 3, 18 August)

Introduction: What's new about the power of the Spirit in our lives? What new about being a child of God today? Are we ready for new encounters when we come to old texts in the Bible? God can and does do new things with the Bible through the power of the Spirit. What do these radical words mean to you and your community today? What's new about them? Let's get stuck in. Are you sitting comfortably? Don't worry you don't need to be! You're going to be on the edge of your seat anyway...

Setting the scene: Picture the jaw drop and the double take of Paul expressing his bamboozlement in verse 20!

Seeds to sow: What does it mean to you to be a child of God?

- 1. Galatians 4: 1-5 **Belonging!**** We are adopted, gathered in, pulled close! We are prized!
- 2. Galatians 4: 6 **Abba, Father!**** The Spirit moves within us, helping us to recognise and reach for God. It is significant that in this letter, written in Greek, *Abba* is rendered in Aramaic, as Jesus would have said it himself.
- 3. Galatians 4: 7 **Child and heir!**** In a time with more rigid social structures than our own this is a radical metaphor. We are not God's slaves, or servants — we are beloved heirs each cherished. Paul is keen throughout Galatians to cut the distance between us and God, cut through the unnecessary and distracting, such is his heart that people hear the gospel.
- 4. Galatians 4: 8-11 **Have I wasted my time!**** Moving from the major key of verses 1-7 we can almost hear Paul sag as he sighs here. These verses give us a touching insight into Paul as a real breathing person.
- 5. Galatians 4: 12-16 **What has become of the goodwill?**** Paul really cares and you can hear how much it matters to him. How can we reconnect to this man to experience his passion anew?
- 6. Galatians 4: 17-18 **The right kind of zealous!**** Our world, like that of Galatia in the first century, is full of people zealous to make us zealous about things. Having care, passion and drive is not a bad thing but are we asking what we are zealous for and how consistent we are in our enthusiasm? Are we zealous for a united world where all people can flourish together?
- 7. Galatians 4: 19-20 **Bamboozled!**** Paul is perplexed. bamboozled, dumbfoonert! It's fair to say he is far from detached! He is absolutely invested in the Galatians, he even thinks of them as his children, though they weary him, stretch him, push, and defy him (much like children the world over and throughout history then!).

What's new about freedom? (Week 4, 22 September)

Introduction: This week we think about *freedom from* and *freedom for*. He challenges the specific issue of the day: whether or not Gentile believers are required to participate in circumcision, and argues vehemently (at one point incredibly viscerally) that they *don't* and that it's so utterly beside the point. This new thing that's happening, Paul argues, is not about buying your freedom through certain acts, but in recognising that you are in fact already free, that you have been freed from Christ and that means you are free not only from the things that hold you back but also free to love one another, to join in the vibrant flourishing of the kingdom! Despite these words being ancient is there something new here our society needs to hear? About Christianity as offering true freedom, true adventure, true living?

Setting the scene: A quiet moment of someone taking deep breaths.

Seeds to sow: What are you free *for* this week?

1. **Galatians 5: 1 Freedom!!!** Consider the freedom of standing firm, feet planted where you want them.
2. **Galatians 5: 2-6 Get it together!** Circumcision — a drastic and unnecessary route that's taking the Galatians in the wrong direction.
3. **Galatians 5: 7-10 You were running a good race!** To mix sports metaphors we can imagine it's halftime at the stadium and the scoreboard is looking shocking. Paul steps up to galvanise the team.
4. **Galatians 5: 11-12 Paul goes overboard...** So... wow. These verses remind us that Paul was a human being, in this instance a furious human being, who could take a metaphor a bit far...
5. **Galatians 5: 13-15 Not just 'free from...', but 'free for...'** We are not just free from, we are free for. Free for loving one another. We are free *from* in-fighting and free *for* flourishing together. How can we connect with newness of this freedom?
6. **Galatians 5: 16-21 Walk by the Spirit!** Freedom is not a blank cheque to behave in any way we want. It's the power to choose, to not give in to harmful, destructive urges, but instead to take control of our lives.
7. **Galatians 5: 22-26 Let's keep in step with the Spirit!** We have to keep in step with the Spirit... because the Spirit is moving! The Spirit of God is not an abstract feeling, a static concept. And love, joy and peace are not simply vague ideals, they are all endeavours that take work! They are the product of our joining in with the Spirit. The freedom Christ gives us empowers us to keep up with the Holy Spirit! The power of the Spirit is ever-new in our lives? Are we ready for the newness?

What's new about our lives? (Week 5, 29 September)

Introduction: A month in Galatians, a vibrant passionate text full of newness and ever-newness as we encounter it afresh. So what's new for us? What are we carrying with us into the next season?

Setting the scene: An evergreen tree in a sunlit glade.

Seeds to sow: What does it mean to boast in Christ?

- 1. Galatians 6: 1-6 Give each other a hand!** What does this message of discernment and discipleship mean to us today?
- 2. Galatians 6: 7-10 Don't weary of doing good!** What opportunities do we have to do good today?
- 3. Galatians 6: 11 What large letters!** Paul picks up the pen! He is taking over from his scribe and laying it down on the line. The large letters are likely not literal, more a statement of the intensity and magnitude of what he is saying in conclusion, but who knows maybe Paul had comically large handwriting!
- 4. Galatians 6: 12-13 Don't be compelled!** Thinking about agendas behind people's actions. What's ever-new in this advice?
- 5. Galatians 6: 14 Boasting only in Christ!** Do we boast about Christ in our lives? What new ways we can use to boast about Christ?
- 6. Galatians 6: 15-16 What matters is the new creation!** Paul says, let's think bigger! Remember what matters. what is really going on, the deep ever-new transformation that is going on within us.
- 7. Galatians 6: 17-18 Grace be with you!** Ending with grace. This book, full of passion, by turns beautiful and vulgar, the work of a dedicated, deeply invested soul, ends with this gentle benediction of grace, presumably (given verse 14) written in his own handwriting. Paul does not claim himself to be a perfect paragon of grace, and in a sense that's part of his point — none of us are or can be. None but Christ, our older brother.